

Briefing Paper

Fossil Creek Wild & Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan Decision

December 4, 2020

Congress designated the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River in 2009. Since then, the Coconino and Tonto national forests have been developing a comprehensive river management plan (CRMP) and several site-specific activities. Fossil Creek is a renowned recreation destination, so the CRMP is focused on providing continued recreational opportunities while protecting the wild and scenic river. A final EIS, CRMP, and draft Record of Decision (ROD) for objection are planned to be released December 4, 2020.

Proposed Decision

The draft decision selects **Alternative E, with modifications**. This decision provides broad flexibility to respond to changing conditions and includes potential for moderate increases in parking, recreation sites, trails, and visitor numbers over time. When the CRMP is initially implemented, visitor numbers and recreation sites will be the same as those existing under the current permit system.

Comprehensive River Management Plan

- Long-term management plan to guide future management actions under an adaptive management framework.

Permit system

- Existing permit system will be formally adopted and will continue to be used to manage access.
- Visitor numbers and recreation site access will start as the same as current: 148 vehicles (810 PAOT) from April 1 – October 1. The permit system season could be modified, visitors numbers could increase or decrease and recreation site access may be modified under the adaptive management framework.

Capacity

- Total long-term corridor-wide user capacity of 202 vehicles at one time and approximately 1,040 PAOT.
- An additional 30 PAOT could be added for incidental walk-ins.

Vehicle Access

- Public motor vehicle access into the Fossil Creek canyon on FR 708 from SR 87 in Strawberry may be restored to all vehicles (with permitted access) once repair of the 4.1-mile closed section is completed.
 - o this section of road will continue to remain available for emergency response and utility maintenance.
 - o 0.3 mi of existing roads would be decommissioned.

Recreation Sites and Amenities

The type, location, and arrangement of amenities within recreation sites will be determined through a separate site design process, and these recreation site components may be adapted over time to address changing needs.

Site	Features
Mazatzal	Approximately 4 parking spaces; amenities such as trash receptacles, sign kiosks, toilet, bike racks; access to Mazatzal Wilderness; possible site of designated camping.
Purple Mountain	Approximately 6 parking spaces; amenities such as trash receptacles, sign kiosks, toilet, bike racks; possible site of designated camping.
Sally May	Approximately 10 parking spaces; amenities such as trash receptacles, sign kiosks, toilet bike racks; possible site of designated camping.
FR 708/502 Junction	Temporary parking; amenities such as vault toilet, sign kiosks, visitor contact station.
Cactus Flat	Possible future new recreation site with approximately 50 parking spaces, some of which may accommodate stock trailers; amenities such as interpretive displays, toilet, trash receptacles, picnic tables, and bike racks; possible site of administrative campsites. Creek access is not available immediately adjacent to this recreation site, so developing a means of providing visitors who park at Cactus Flat with safe access to other recreation sites will need to occur concurrently. Such means may include improved trail connectivity or enhanced transportation options such as a local shuttle. Establishing these means may require additional NEPA analysis.

Site	Features
Homestead	Upper/lower loops: approximately 25 parking spaces; amenities such as toilet, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, picnic tables, shelters, bike racks; possible site of designated camping. West loop: prioritized for tribal use as needed; toilet available for all use. Potential for portion of area available for group use (e.g. camping for school groups).
Heinrich	Host/administrative site with overnight accommodations, toilet, and storage facilities. Possible future new recreation site with approximately 5 parking spaces; amenities such as sign kiosks, short interpretive trail and/or canopy walk, toilet, and trash receptacles. No public river access.
Fossil Creek Bridge	At time of decision, site will contain approximately 10 parking spaces. Site may be expanded to approximately 15 parking spaces in the future. Amenities such as toilet, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, bike racks.
Tonto Bench	At time of decision, site will contain 21 parking spaces. Parking will be reduced to approximately 15 parking spaces. Amenities such as toilet, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, bike racks; possible site of designated camping.
Irving	Approximately 18 parking spaces. Amenities such as toilets, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, picnic tables (including group sites), shade ramadas, and bike racks possible on both sides of creek. Possible site of designated camping. Flume trailhead.
Dixon Lewis (Waterfall) Trailhead and Trail	Approximately 21 parking spaces; amenities such as toilet, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, picnic tables, bike racks; creek access points to creek along the trail.
Bob Bear (Fossil Springs)/ Rim Trailhead	Combined parking for existing Bear Trailhead and new Rim Trailhead. Approximately 30 parking spaces, plus 3 stock trailer spaces with corrals. Amenities such as toilet, sign kiosks, trash receptacles, picnic tables, bike racks. Possible site of designated camping.
Fossil Springs area	Accessible via foot trails. Alternative toilet may be constructed in the future if needed. Designated camping may be established at one or more locations.
East welcome station	Visitor contact station, with possibility of improved entry area and signage.
Other recreation site infrastructure	Short interpretive trail and/or canopy walk possible at Heinrich. Shade structures with interpretive information possible along FR 708.

Non-motorized Trails

- Adoption of existing trails.
 - o The 0.9-mile Waterfall Trail will be designated as an official trail and re-named the Dixon Lewis Trail.
 - o The existing 4-mile Fossil Springs Trail will remain open and be re-named the Bob Bear Trail.
 - o The existing 4.5-mile Flume Trail will remain open.
- New trails to be constructed.
 - o A 0.3-mile connector trail between Cactus Flat and Homestead if parking is implemented at Cactus Flat .
 - o Rim Trail - a one-mile loop trail on the canyon rim near the Bob Bear Trailhead.
 - o A total of one mile of trails from parking areas to Creekside.

Other Infrastructure

- A new bridge will be installed on FR 708.
- FR 502 Gabion (rock and wire barrier) modification to address streambank erosion and protect the FR 502 road.

Restoration

- 35 acres of bare areas, 4 miles of unauthorized trails, and 1.1 miles of road to be restored.

Fossil Springs Botanical Area

- Will be modified and slightly expanded from 32 to 33 acres.